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ABSTRACT

This documents describes a perspective on Vygotsky's theory of play and imagination that differs significantly from previous interpretations. Vygotsky proposed a developmental theory of creativity in which creative imagination develops from children's play activities into a higher mental function that can be consciously regulated through inner speech. In adolescence, a new level of creativity is reached as imagination and thinking in concepts begin to interact. But it is not until adulthood that creativity fully matures. Vygotsky's theory proposes that children learn how to do pretend play through interactions with an adult or more capable peer. Vygotsky specifies that creativity develops from making object substitutions in play. Evidence suggests that, contrary to the Piaget-derived view that the ludic symbol arises from solitary play, the majority of object substitutions during pretend play of children between 12 and 25 months of age are initiated by the mother. Contemporary research on play should not underestimate the importance of adult-child play interactions for the psychological development of the child. (RH)

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The Relevance of Vygotsky's Theory of Creative Imagination for Contemporary Research on Play

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As a result of my translations of previously untranslated works by Vygotsky and Elkonin, I have formulated a perspective on Vygotsky's theory of play and imagination that differs significantly from interpretations previously offered by many Western researchers. Until recently Western researchers have had to rely on one paper "Play and its Role in the Mental Development of the Child" (1933/1978b) for an account of Vygotsky's theory of play. This has resulted in a distorted view of Vygotsky's theory of play and a poor sense of how it relates to his general psychological theory.

Vygotsky's theory is relevant for contemporary research on play because it provides a metatheory that can organize disparate lines of research and it raises new issues for future study. This paper focuses on the issue of whether children learn how to do pretend play through interactions with adults and how these interactions affect the development of creative imagination.

I began translating Vygotsky's works in 1984 as part of research that I began in 1980 with my husband, who is an artist. We formulated a developmental theory of creativity that focused on how perceptual resemblance is used as a semiotic device in both visual art and metaphor. Independently of Vygotsky's work we proposed that imagination matures into a consciously directed thought process that collaborates with logical thought. We also proposed that the ability to use visual analogies was an intergral part of creative imagination that originated in children's play. (see the bibliography for a listing of our publications)

We advanced our theory as a neo-Freudian theory and as we searched for a more contemporary cognitive psychology we came to study the writings of Piaget and then Vygotsky. As I translated Vygotsky's papers on creative imagination I found that our theories were compatible.

The titles of Vygotsky's three papers on creative imagination are "Imagination and Creativity in Childhood" written in 1930 (1967),"Imagination and Creativity in the Adolescent" which is chapter 12 of Vygotsky's book The Pedology of the Adolescent published in 1931 (1984), and "Imagination and its Development in Childhood" a lecture which was presented in 1932 (1960a).

I have also translated passages from El'konin's book The Psychology of Play (1978) which I will refer to later in this paper.

Vygotsky's theory of creative imagination and his theory of play evolved along with his general psychological theory from the beginning and are integral parts of this theory. Briefly stated Vygotsky proposed a developmental theory of creativity in which creative imagination develops from children's play activities into a higher mental function that can be consciously regulated through inner speech. In adolescence a new level of creativity is reached as imagination and thinking in concepts begin to interact, but it is not until adulthood that creativity fully matures.

Vygotsky's claim that creative imagination develops out of children's pretend play is the focus of this presentation. I understand Vygotsky's theory as proposing that children learn how to do pretend play through interactions with an adult or more capable peer. Vygotsky stated that play creates a zone of proximal development (1933/1978b, p. 102) and defined the zone of proximal development as a higher level of performance that a child could achieve in collaboration with an adult or more capable peer (1933-1934/1978a, p.86) By this definition Vygotsky would not consider solitary activities a means of creating the zone of proximal development. Specifically, I see no indication in Vygotsky's writings that he considered play as being a solitary activity that creates the zone of proximal development. El'konin, who considers his own work to be a continuation of Vygotsky's research on play (1978, 5 -8), explicitly states that pretend play is the result of social interactions between the child and an adult (1978, p. 163-164).

In 1925 in the paper "Consciousness as a Problem in the Psychology of Behavior" (1979) Vygotsky put forth the basic premise of his general psychological theory, when he proposed that consciousness is the result of the internalization of speech (p. 29-31). At the same time Vygotsky discussed the role of creative imagination in human learning as being repeated experience, that is, as behavior that repeats what had already been done beforehand in the imagination (1979, p.14).

When Vygotsky wrote "The Prehistory of Written Language", in either 1928 or 1929, he used the example of the child's use of a stick as a horse during play to illustrate the role of gestural depiction in play (1928-1929/1978c, p. 108).

Later in 1930 in "Imagination and Creativity in Childhood" he used the same example to illustrate how creative imagination develops from children's play (1967, p. 77).

The general claim that pretend play enhances creativity is supported by contemporary Western research, such as Dansky (1980) and Pepler (1979) (refer to reviews by Rubin, Fein, and Vandenberg, 1983, p. 750; and Kogan, 1983, p. 643). However, Vygotsky does more than make a general claim that creativity develops from pretend play, he specifies that it develops from object substitutions in play. To my knowledge there has been no research on the specific relationship between object substitions during play and creativity. Correlational studies would be easy to do, but demonstrating a causal relationship between object substitutions and creativity would require an experimental design. Such an experiment would require training children to do object substitutions during pretend play to determine if this increases creativity.

In their review of the play research literature in 1983, Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg concluded that children can be successfully trained in pretend play by researchers (p. 753). However, the existing studies focus on sociodramatic and thematic pretend play training and did not specifically address training the child to do object substitutions within those contexts.

Besides proposing that children can learn how to do object substitutions in the context of experimental studies, I interpret Vygotsky's theory as proposing that pretend play is typically learned through play interactions with adults at home.

My interpretation of Vygotsky 's theory as proposing that children learn how to do object substitutions from play interactions with an adult is consistent with Vygotsky's learning theory in which learning creates the zone of proximal development by awakening mental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with another person (1933-1934/1978a, p. 90). Vygotsky also stated that "learning and development are inter-related from the very first days of a child's life" (1933-1934,/1978a, p,84), so it is clear that he is not using the term 'learning' to refer only to formal school instruction.

In "The Prehistory of Written Language" when Vygotsky first introduced the example of the child's use of a stick as a horse in play, he stated that, "...a stick becomes a riding-horse for the child, because it can be placed between the

legs and it is possible to apply a gesture to it, which will indicate to the child, that a stick in this case designates a horse (1928-1929/1935, p.77)." Vygotsky does not say exactly who it is that indicates to the child that the stick can be used as a horse, but the fact that another person makes the indication to the child is clear from the Russian grammar. Vygotsky uses the noun for 'child' in the dative case; if he had intended to say that the child *indicated to himself* that the stick could be used as a horse he would have used the reflexive pronoun *ceby'a* instead of the dative case of the Russian noun *rebenok*.

It is interesting to note that in the published english translation of this paper in 1978, the phrase "indicate to the child" was omitted (1978c, p. 108). Perhaps the influence of the Piagetian paradigm has been so great that the concept of a child learning how to do object substitutions through play interactions with an adult has been incongruous for many researchers.

The question of whether children learn pretend play through interactions with adults is of particular interest to contemporary researchers in the West who have recently begun to study the social origins of pretend play. Prior to the 1980's play research was dominated by Piagetian theory (1962) which assumed that the ludic symbol spontaneously arose from the child's solitary play. After reviewing the research literature on solitary pretend play I have found that the research evidence that pretend play arises spontaneously in children is not as conclusive as many researchers assume it to be.

For example, the McCune-Nicolich study, which is commonly regarded as confirming Piaget's substages of pretend play, was not actually a study of solitary pretend play because the mother was allowed to interact with the child during play (McCune-Nicolich,1977, p. 91). Parten's famous study on solitary play (1932) was conducted with children at a day-care center rather than in a setting with their mothers. Parten found both solitary and co-operative play in children of all ages, with solitary play being more frequent among the 1- year olds and co-operative play more frequent among the 5- year olds.

The 1983 review of play research by Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg (p. 728-729) concluded that observational research has failed to show that children learn how to play through interactions with their mothers and then erroneously cited the Dunn & Wooding (1977) study as supporting that conclusion. Dunn & Wooding (1977) actually found that mothers of children

aged 18- to 24- months initiated 39% of the pretend play episodes and that most of the child-initiated episodes were interactions with the mother. At the end of their paper, Dunn & Wooding state that we must keep an open mind regarding the Russian claim that adult modeling is responsible for early symbolic activity.

Several studies in Bretherton's book Symbolic Play (1982) have also provided evidence for social pretend play occurring as early as 1 and a half years of age. For example, O'Connell and Bretherton found greater diversity of play when the child collaborated with the mother, Dunn & Dale found differences between the child's play interactions with the mother in comparison to play interactions with an older sibling, and Miller & Garvey found that most episodes of mother-baby role play were first achieved with the support of care givers.

In a recent study involving home observations, Wendy Haight (1988) found that at age 12- months 75% of pretend play is social, and of that social pretend play 87% consists of play interactions with the mother and 13% with other adults. Between 12- and 48- months 70 to 80% of pretend play was social, but the play partner changed. For example, at age 24- months the mother was stilled involved in about 87% of the play but about 12% of pretend play was now done with another child. After that the percentage of pretend play time with the mother gradually decreased while play time with another child increased, so that at 48- months of age about 50% of pretend play is with the mother and 50% with another child. These findings suggest that the mother is more active than peers in early social pretend play, and that while studies of children in formal group settings indicate that social pretend play with peers is infrequent among two year olds this does not mean that solitary pretend play is characteristic of the 2- year old child when playing at home.

Vygotsky's colleague El'konin specifically claims that the child learns how to do object substitutions through interactions with an adult and that object substitutions are a prerequiste for role play which appears at about 3 years of age (1978, p.168). El'konin makes some interesting claims about the development of object substitutions that could easily be tested. According to El'konin "..at first the child reproduces object activities only on those objects, on which they were modeled with the help of adults. The child transfers these activities to other objects, suggested at first by adults..." and "He names objects by the names of

substitute objects only after activity with them and the naming of them with adult play designations" (1978, p. 168).

In a recent article in Voprosy Psikhologii, Moukhina (1988) also states that, "the child learns how to convert an object into a substitute object from an adult" and that the use of object substitutions in play develops the child's imagination (p. 126).

In my own research (1989) I have found that while children do spontaneously perform object substitutions as early as 12- months of age, the majority of object substitutions during pretend play of children aged 12- to 25- months are initiated by the mother. Currently I am doing bimonthly longitudinal observations of children as young as 14- months of age during pretend play with their mothers using a standardized set of toys. Besides the frequency of pretend play, I am recording types of object substitutions initated by both mother and child, and the context during which these occur. I am also designing a way of coding how the mother scaffolds the zone of proximal development based on a system designed by David Wood to code scaffolding of mother-child interactions during problem solving (Wood, 1986, p. 197).

Vygotsky wrote "Imagination and Creativity in Childhood" in 1930 when he was also writing The History of the Development of the Higher Mental Functions (1960b). In "Imagination and Creativity in Childhood", Vygotsky mentions that "...the roots of creative combinations can be found in the play of animals but only humans have developed these forms of activity up to a higher level" (1967, p. 8). In his other two papers on creative imagination "Imagination and Creativity in the Adolescent" (1931/1984, p. 210) and "Imagination and its Development in Childhood" (1932/1960, p. 343), Vygotsky explicitly refers to the development of creative imagination as a higher mental function.

In The History of the Development of the Higher Mental Functions (1930-1931/1960b) Vygotsky stated that any higher mental function first appears "as a form of interaction and co-operation among people as an interpsychological category. Then it appears as a form of individual adaptation, as a part of an individual's psychology, as an intrapsychological category" (p.153).

In "Imagination and its Development in Childhood," Vygotsky goes on to say that "research demonstrates at each step that the path of the development of

children's imagination, as well as the development of the other higher mental functions, is through existing forms connected with the speech of the child, with the basic psychological forms of his communication with his surroundings, i.e., with the basic forms of the collective social activity of the child's consciousness" (1932/1960a, p. 342-343).

There are many other interesting and testable hypotheses that can be generated from Vygotsky's theory of creative imagination that I have not had time to address here. The whole issue of the role of speech in regulating the creative imagination of the preschooler and its internalization at 7 years of age opens another new area of research. The interaction of imagination and conceptual thought in the creative thinking of the adolescent, and its maturation in adult artistic and scientific creativity is another new area of research worth exploring.

In conclusion, contemporary research on play supports the claim that children learn how to do pretend play through interactions with adults and that these interactions effect the development of creative imagination. This issue is of particular importance for early childhood education. Recently, David Elkind (1987) has pointed out the dangers of imposing formal instruction on preschoolers in order to accelerate their learning. Vygotsky argued long ago (1933-1934/1978a, p.84-91; 1933/1978b, p.102-103) that play rather than formal instruction is the most important form of learning for the preschooler. Contemporary research on play should not underestimate the importance of adult-child play interactions for the psychological development of the child.

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